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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA LEVANT DAS ON LEBANON, DECEMBER 18, 2007

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Classified By: political minister counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) French MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille on December 18 said France was pleased the overall results of the previous day's Lebanon ministerial. He particularly praised the Secretary's performance at the meeting in the face of initial Egyptian, Arab League, Saudi, Spanish, and Italian resistance to issuing a statement. Her willingness to delete a specific reference to Syria for criticism allowed consensus on a weaker but still forceful text.

¶2. (C) Pouille highlighted the brief Arab insistence at the ministerial on referring to "all outside powers" instead of just "outside powers" as indicative of a worsening trend with respect to the Arabs, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League in particular. "All" would theoretically have criticized "interference" by France and the U.S., while the formulation used leads to the preferred assumption that Syria and Iran are the primary offenders. Pouille attributed increasing Saudi weakness on Lebanon to its determination to avoid problems with convoking the next Arab summit in Damascus at which it hopes to receive further backing for King Abdallah's AL peace initiative. Indeed, he lamented the Saudis' and Egyptians' failure to provide real support to March 14 when it was really needed. (Comment: Pouille did not say so, but his lament was consistent with what the French expected to have been a feckless Arab response to the Lebanese failure to elect a president on time. End comment)

¶3. (C) Pouille was extremely pessimistic about the situation in Lebanon. He saw no sign that December 22 would see a breakthrough and a presidential election. The parties were too far apart, and he claimed that France (or at least the MFA) fully respected Hariri's redlines on the composition of the government and other opposition demands. This applied very much to FM Kouchner, who was not looking to return to Beirut in the immediate future but might well consider doing so after Christmas should the impasse persist.

¶4. (C) It was less clear to Pouille what the current Elysee thinking was ("You should ask them yourself"). He privately (please protect) agreed with the contention that Sarkozy had gone too far with Syria to back out or back down easily. Pouille described the Elysee as "upset" with the Syrians for not respecting the "roadmap" to the election but not prepared to close the door to Damascus. He implied that Elysee

Secretary General Gueant had bungled his contacts with Syrian

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FM Mu'allim and given the Syrians room to gain the upper hand. We asked whether Sarkozy still thought about going to Beirut December 23, as some press have reported, given the unlikelihood his precondition -- election of a new president -- would be met. Pouille cautioned that we don't know what will happen December 22. Sarkozy's contingency plan (which Pouille swore was for real) would be to stop in Beirut on the 23rd en route to Luxor, Egypt, where Sarkozy plans to spend Christmas. Pouille rolled his eyes and looked away when we imagined a new round of frantic phone calls to Damascus from the Elysee between now and Saturday.

15. (C) Pouille agreed with our view that moving quickly on the election was essential, as was keeping pressure on parliament speaker Nabih Berri. When we mentioned that A/S Welch had returned to Beirut, he encouraged Welch to meet with French Ambassador Parant to compare notes. He also asked whether Welch would see Michel Aoun.

16. (C) Pouille several times observed that the situation becomes more dangerous as the vacuum persists. He rejected the argument that the Lebanese public's current passivity would last, especially if the opposition decides to escalate the confrontation. Worries about how the situation could worsen once parliament goes out of session December 31 had led the French to speculate that a new wave of sit-ins and other initially non-violent actions would precipitate a crisis that could become violent and include assassinations. Pouille said the LAF, with its commander, General Sleiman, marginalized as an active presidential candidate, would cease to be a cohesive and disciplined force of order. The decision by its personnel to go home would have dire implications for UNIFIL and the security of southern Lebanon. The bottom line was that the Lebanese needed to move quickly to get the election out of the way before the end of the year

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and halt what Elysee diplomatic adviser Levitte had talked about in a December 16 meeting with S/I Satterfield and UN envoy Terje Larsen: the Syrian-orchestrated systematic destruction of Lebanon's key institutions, starting with the presidency, moving next to the cabinet, and finishing with the LAF.

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